WEEK TWO: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSIFICATION SCHEMES

Introduction

The development of classification schemes did not happen overnight. It was a gradu al process that evolved alongside the growth of human knowledge and libraries. From ancient times when books were few and stored without order, to modern times where millions of resources exist in print and electronic formats, classification has become a vital tool for organising information.

In this lecture, we shall trace the historical development of library classification, identi fy key contributors, and understand how major schemes like Dewey, Library of Congre ss, and others came into existence.

Early Beginnings of Classification

The idea of arranging knowledge in a systematic way can be traced as far back as **an cient civilisations** such as **Egypt, Greece, and Rome**. Although there were no formal c lassification schemes at that time, scholars made attempts to arrange materials logic ally.

The Library of Alexandria (3rd Century BC)

One of the earliest recorded attempts at classification was in the **Library of Alexandri a** in Egypt, one of the greatest libraries of the ancient world. The chief librarian, **Callim achus**, compiled a bibliographic list known as *Pinakes*, which divided the collection in to various subject areas such as philosophy, poetry, medicine, and law. Although the arrangement was crude and not systematic like modern schemes, it laid the foundati on for subject arrangement in libraries.

Medieval Period

During the medieval period, most libraries were found in monasteries and cathedrals. Books were few and were arranged mainly according to their size or how they were ch ained to shelves, rather than by subject. However, with the invention of the **printing pr ess by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450**, more books were produced, and libraries began to grow. This expansion created the need for a more organised system of arranging b ooks.

Emergence of Modern Classification

The modern period of library classification began in the 19th century when several for mal schemes were developed. The aim was to create systematic, flexible, and expand able systems that could accommodate the increasing volume of publications.

Bacon's Influence (1620)

Before formal schemes emerged, **Francis Bacon**, a British philosopher, made an impo rtant contribution to knowledge organisation through his book *The Advancement of L earning* (1620). He divided all human knowledge into three main classes:

Memory — representing History

Imagination — representing Poetry

Reason — representing Philosophy or Science

This threefold division later influenced many classification schemes that came centu ries after, especially in their conceptual structure.

Major Phases of Library Classification Development

19th Century — The Birth of Modern Schemes

The 19th century witnessed the birth of several major classification schemes still in u se today. The major ones include:

a. Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)

The **Dewey Decimal Classification**, developed by **Melvil Dewey** in **1876**, marked a tur ning point in library organisation.
Dewey's idea was to divide all knowledge into **ten main classes**, each represented by a number from 000 to 900.
Each class was then subdivided into ten divisions, and each division into ten sections — creating a decimal hierarchy.

For example:

000 – General works

100 – Philosophy

200 – Religion

300 – Social Sciences

400 – Language

500 – Science

600 – Technology

700 – Arts and Recreation

800 – Literature

900 – History and Geography

The decimal system made the scheme logical, expandable, and easy to use. DDC bec ame one of the most widely used classification schemes in libraries across the world, including Nigeria.

b. Library of Congress Classification (LCC)

The **Library of Congress Classification** was developed in the **early 20th century (aro und 1904)** by librarians at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., under the directi on of **Herbert Putnam**.
Unlike DDC, which uses numbers, LCC uses **a combination of letters and numbers** (a n alphanumeric system).

For example:

B – Philosophy, Psychology, Religion

D – History

H – Social Sciences

Q – Science

R – Medicine

Each class is further divided by numbers, creating more detailed subject representatio n. LCC was designed mainly for large academic and research libraries and is still use d in many university libraries today, including those in Nigeria.

c. Universal Decimal Classification (UDC)

The **Universal Decimal Classification (UDC)** was developed by **Paul Otlet** and **Henri L a Fontaine** in **1895**. It was based on Dewey's system but adapted for international us e, especially in multilingual and scientific contexts.
UDC introduced the use of **symbols and punctuation marks** (such as ":" and "/") to ex press relationships between subjects.
It is mostly used in specialised and scientific libraries in Europe.

20th Century — Further Developments

In the 20th century, other notable schemes were developed:

a. Bliss Bibliographic Classification (BC)

Developed by **Henry Evelyn Bliss** between **1929 and 1953**, this scheme aimed to arra nge subjects according to their logical and scientific relationships, rather than arbitrar y numbers.
It is known for its **flexibility** and **philosophical foundation**, although it is not as widely used as DDC or LCC.

b. Colon Classification (CC)

This scheme was developed by **S. R. Ranganathan**, an Indian librarian, in **1933**.
Colon Classification is unique because it is **faceted**, meaning it allows subjects to be broken down into their basic concepts or facets. Ranganathan identified five fundam ental categories (PMEST):

P – Personality

M – Matter

E – Energy

S – Space

T – Time

For example, a book on *the economic development of Nigeria in the 21st century* cou ld be expressed using a combination of these facets. The name "Colon Classificatio n" comes from the use of colons (:) to separate facets in the notation.

This approach made the scheme highly flexible and logical.

Subject-Specific Classification Schemes

As knowledge expanded, some subject areas developed their own specialised scheme s to handle the peculiarities of their disciplines.
Examples include:

Moys Classification Scheme for Law (1968) by Elizabeth Moys.

National Library of Medicine (NLM) Classification for medical sciences.

Chemical Abstracts Service (CAS) for chemistry.

Such schemes are used mainly in libraries that serve a specific professional audience (e.g., law or medical libraries).

Classification in the Digital Age

With the growth of the internet and digital libraries, classification has evolved beyond physical arrangement.
Today, online systems such as **WorldCat**, **Library of Congress Online Catalogue**, and **OCLC** use classification data in digital form to organise and retrieve information globally.
Modern classification has become a blend of **traditional notations** and **metadata-based digital organisation**.

Summary

The development of classification has moved from the simple listing of subjects in ancient times to complex and scientifically designed systems used globally.
From Callimachus' *Pinakes* in the Library of Alexandria to Dewey's Decimal System, and finally to online and faceted classification, the aim has always been the same — to bring order to knowledge and make access easier.
Understanding the historical development helps librarians appreciate the logic and evolution of the schemes they use today.

Classwork / Assignment

Discuss how digital technology has influenced modern classification practices.